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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest gives elementary school teachers realistic information about American Indians and Alaska Natives and identifies some of the common myths based on ethnic bias. Bias against Indians is often the result of inaccurate information. Stylized classroom accounts of Indian life reinforce "buckskin-and-feather" or "Eskimo and igloo" stereotypes. Indians who defended their homelands from invaders have been portrayed as enemies of progress, barriers to frontier settlement, and, more recently, a "social problem" draining national resources. Teachers can be victims of the instructional materials they count on, and so they should become consciously aware of the processes by which they choose such materials. In recent years, American Indians have recognized their right to insist upon accurate and unbiased accounts of their own history and culture and more and more educators are realizing that this right extends to all students. Myths about native peoples are commonplace, occurring in history, law, sociology and economics. Many people believe, for example, that American Indians share a common language and culture, when there are actually more than 300 officially recognized tribes, distinct in many ways including language. Other examples of myths about Indians include the "first Thanksgiving" stories that were created in the 1890s to promote the "melting pot" theory of American social progress. Instead of repeating such myths, teaches should encourage classroom discussion of real and current Indian issues (such as land and fishing rights) as a means of teaching American Indian history and establishing Native Americans as a people. This document includes 10 references and a 4-item annotated list of essential resources. (TES)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools June 1990

Unbiased Teaching About American Indians and Alaska Natives in Elementary Schools

Digest EDO-RC-90-8

THE CONTRIBUTION OF American Indians and Alaska Natives to American life reflects a long heritage, which includes the widespread use of Indian words that name geographic places in this nation. American Indians and Alaska Natives maintain their tribal traditions, religion, and languages. At the same time, they strive to assimilate modern technologies. Nonetheless, many students in American schools know comparatively little about the native populations of their own country.

This Digest gives teachers realistic information about this growing population. It identifies some of the common myths about American Indians and Alaska Natives that contribute to curriculum bias. The concluding discussion suggests activities and resources to help elementary students—and their teachers—understand the realities of how Indians live today and how they lived in the past.

The role of accurate information

Bias about Indians is often the result of inaccurate information. The realities of American Indian and Alaskan Native life are often oversimplified and distorted. Stylized classroom accounts of Indian life reinforce the "buckskin and feather" and the "Eskimo and igloo" stereotypes (Madison School District, 1978). With such instruction, students are certain to develop misguided impressions of Indians.

If the Indian population were declining, this situation would be an "academic" problem. The Indian population, however, is growing (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). Lack of knowledge about American Indians and Alaska Natives among the future generation of Americans will not serve the nation well.

In textbooks, movies, and TV programs, American Indians and Alaska Natives have been treated in ways that tend both to overlook their dignity and to disgrace their heritage (Pepper, 1976). For example, Indians who defended their homeland from invaders (and who today seek to preserve their languages and cultures) have often been viewed as enemies of progress. In the context of history, they have been viewed as barriers to the settlement of the frontier by white people. In the present, they have been viewed as a "social problem," a drain on national resources. Teachers, in short, can be the victims of the instructional materials they count on.

Teachers' decisions and curriculum

Teachers make many key instructional decisions every day, but few are consciously aware of the processes by which they make decisions (Manley-Casimir & Wassermann, 1989). Decisions often rest on personal experiences with unfamiliar cultures and ethnic groups—experiences that are often too limited to serve the goal of unbiased instruction. Only in recent years have Indian people themselves recognized their right to insist upon accurate and unbiased accounts of their own history and existence (National Education Association, 1983). With this recognition, however, more educators are realizing that *all* children must learn accurate information about historic *and* contemporary American Indian and Alaskan Native people.

At the same time, educators have traditionally worried over curriculum materials that reflect a lack of interest in and understanding of American Indian and Alaskan Native cultures and history. Many educators, Indians as well as others, have given much effort to develop classroom materials; stereotyping is less common than it once was. Omission, distortion, and ethnocentrism are, however, still common (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1977; Larsen, 1987).

The following information should help teachers challenge the myths, distortions, stereotypes, and racist information that have been common fare in most textbooks and curriculum.

Myths and information to dispel them

Myths about Indians are commonplace. Myths occur, for example, in history, law, sociology, and economics. They are spread through "innocent" disciplines, such as folklore. Brief examples follow.

MYTH: American Indians and Alaska Natives are a similar group of people who share a common language and culture and live together in similar places.

FACT: The United States government recognizes more than 300 American Indian tribes. Each has its own particular history, value system, government, language, and social ties that bind it together as a distinct people.

MYTH: All American Indians and Alaskan Natives live on reservations.

FACT: Nationwide, about 50 percent of the Indian population is classified as urban. Rural Indians are those who choose to live in nonmetropolitan areas, on or off reservations. In 1980 only 25 percent of American Indians lived on reservations (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989).

MYTH: American Indians and Alaska Natives receive checks from the government just because they are Indian.

FACT: Funds received from the government are *earnings* from Indian lands or other Indian resources. Education, health services, and other benefits are provided in treaties made with the United States government. These benefits are *payments* for American Indian and Alaskan Native lands.

MYTH: The existing legal status of American Indians, their people, and their governments is the product of accepted principles of international law and equity.

FACT: The "superior" right of European immigrants is based on the racist notion that Native peoples are *savages*. This myth, perhaps the most damaging of all, serves to excuse injustices done to Native peoples.

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MYTH: Indians are a defeated people.

FACT: Courts have defined Indians as a "defeated" people. Most Indian tribal groups were *not*, in fact, defeated through armed combat. In most cases, the relationship with the federal government resulted from approximately 400 treaties signed with the United States government prior to 1871. The terms of these treaties remain in effect today.

MYTH: The "Allotment Act" (the Dawes Act of 1887) was passed to civilize American Indians by making them private property owners.

FACT: The Act was supposed to change Indians into European-type farmers. Private ownership, however, was contrary to the traditional Indian concept of shared ownership. Quite often, the land given to Indians was not suited to farming. Indians received no training, no equipment, and no supplies with which to take up the unfamiliar occupation. "Surplus" Indian lands (often of better quality) were sold to settlers.

MYTH: Thanksgiving is a day of rejoicing that marks the advent of a mutually beneficial relationship between European settlers and Native peoples (see Ramsey, 1979).

FACT: The "First Thanksgiving" stories were actually created in the 1890s and early 1900s to promote the "melting pot" theory of social progress (Larsen, 1987). They are substantially inaccurate (Valdes, 1986). Today, the ethnocentric image of Thanksgiving is reinforced extensively in the media, by religious groups, and other social institutions.

This final example illustrates how teachers can—unwittingly—bring half-truths to the classroom. Actually, the "First American Thanksgiving" is an Indian tradition. It was probably first celebrated many thousands of years ago. Some Indian legends and traditions taught that the land and all things of nature must be respected and protected from overuse. Food was ritually respected in ceremonies that included prayers and the giving of thanks in honor of plants and animals.

Thanksgiving, the American holiday, has always been a time of people coming together; so thanks have long been offered for the gift of fellowship among us all. Teachers have an important opportunity to present Thanksgiving as a time for appreciating American Indians in an unbiased perspective—as they really were and are.

What teachers can do

Teachers, of course, can begin by presenting the facts to dispel myths. Many resources are available to help teachers conduct a "bubble-popping session" (see the annotated bibliography).

A good way to start might be to *teach first* about Indians, using real-life issues on the local level. Then, instruction can expand to include the state, regional, and national contexts. Controversial issues should definitely be discussed. These issues include, for example, fishing rights, land claims, trust responsibility, education and health issues, and drug and alcohol abuse *and* recovery. When instruction is limited only to history and the study of artifacts, children get the impression that American Indians and Alaska Natives have disappeared from the world. They fail to learn that American Indians and Alaska Natives—like they themselves—are "real-time" beings. Historical information *is* important and necessary, but teachers can simply reverse the usual instructional sequence by *treating present-day realities first.*

As part of the instruction, teachers can invite present-day Indian professionals to talk of current issues. Later they can invite local Indian elders to teach of their history. Activities such as mock treaties, in which issues and problems are examined, can inform and motivate students. Moreover, extending such activities can get students involved in their own "Roots"-style histories, perhaps based on the REACH Program (see annotated bibliography).

Problems with bias are indeed widespread. A curriculum based on a factual approach, however, will respect Indians as a people and can foster understanding and acceptance in many ways.

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